

IMPROVISING

A simple method of teaching
the subject to children
of average ability

ETHEL HORN

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IMPROVISING

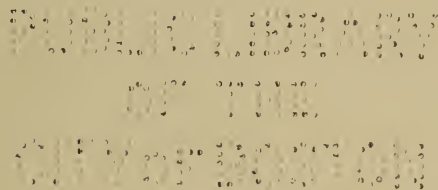
A Simple method of teaching the subject to children
of average ability

By

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IMPROVISING

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

THE art of Music can be approached by three routes, that of the *Composer*, the *Interpreter*, and the *Listener*. But every road, in art as in nature, has its bypaths. One of the most pleasant of these, when Music is the goal, is that trodden by him who, with little or no knowledge of the rules of composition, is able to improvise melodies.

There are those who deprecate the practice of extemporising. They say, and rightly, that thought can only be fully realised when expressed in a definite form, which implies a special technique. They remind us, and rightly, that discipline is as necessary to the mind as gymnastics to the body. But those who seek an ideal in an extreme are doomed to disappointment. A balance should be preserved between Inspiration and its expression by the aid of Technique. With the increasing knowledge of methods of teaching a danger is growing up of technical skill usurping the place of spontaneous thought.

This is especially true in the case of Music. We suggest that the danger will be minimised if the pupil, before he studies the formal rules of Harmony, Counterpoint and Composition, be encouraged to extemporise melodies.

The laws of technique change with the age and vary with the fashion of the moment. But the thought conveyed by a melody is independent of the age—it is the expression in the language of music of the joys and sorrows of life, which are always with us.

Let us then help to keep alive the power of improvising melodies, which in bygone ages belonged, not only to the gifted composer, but to the uninstructed peasant, who did so much to foster the beautiful Folk Music found all over the world.

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A doubt is sometimes expressed as to whether the ordinary child can create a melody. Yet we all agree that music is a "language," and that childhood is notoriously the best time for the study of languages. Unfortunately, music is often thought of as a mere technical accomplishment, and the musical education of the child is misdirected in consequence. But experiments carried out during the last twelve years have proved that children not only *can* improvise melodies, but that they take a keen pleasure in doing so. The work has also a peculiarly invigorating effect on them, and it is easy to see the reason of this.

For the rhythm which underlies all the processes of nature demands an antidote to the spirit of exaggerated routine which at times spoils even the most carefully planned educational curricula. No better aid can be found than a course of musical extemporisation.

CHAPTER II

ORGANISATION OF THE WORK

THOSE who take up the teaching of extemporising will find that the best results are obtained when the lessons given are very short. They may even find it a good plan to stop the work altogether from time to time. The creative impulse is not always present, and nothing but harm will result from demanding an incessant output in this direction.

In schools where 40 minutes a week is given to songs and ear training, it will be enough to devote 10 minutes every third week to extemporising. The seeds planted will not die in between the lessons. If two lessons in songs, etc., are given in the week, extemporising should be taken every other week.

In some schools the younger children (under 12 years of age) have three lessons of 20 minutes each for ear training, and 30 minutes for songs. Here 5 minutes should be given to extemporising at the ear training class every other week.

But, if at any time, as we have already said, the children show signs of poverty of invention, the work should be stopped for two or three weeks, when it will be taken up again with a freshness which shows that fresh impulse has now been gathered.

Extemporising has proved particularly interesting to those who have little or no opportunity for regular instrumental work. School boys, munition workers, factory girls, wounded soldiers—all can be taught to improvise melodies, and their progress will well repay the enthusiast who takes up the work.

SCOPE OF THE WORK

CHAPTER III

SCOPE OF THE WORK

THE teaching of extemporisation should begin with vocal work. There are two reasons for this :—

- (1) Everybody possesses a voice, but many do not play an instrument.
- (2) It is important to enforce the habit of thinking in *phrases*, not in *bars*. The beginner will hesitate for some time in finding the necessary notes on an instrument, but he can always find the notes in his voice.

We must never forget that the art of music owed many of its early developments to *singers*, who extemporised parts to plain song melodies. Their experiments were not always liked by the clergy, whose untiring efforts had preserved the work of musicians in troublous times. In 1322 a Papal decree, aimed against the singers, stated that :

“ Certain disciples of the new school . . . are holding forth in notes which are new to us, preferring to devise methods of their own rather than to continue singing in the old way.”

But, in spite of this, many of the innovations introduced by the singers were embodied in later treatises on music.

Incidentally, we may note that it was the Folk Song of the people, together with the Plain Song Melodies of the Church, which formed the foundation of modern music.

After a certain amount of facility has been obtained in vocal extemporising, the next step will be to add simple accompaniments on an instrument, preferably the piano. In the early stages it is well to limit the pupil to the use of two or three chords, which should be taught by means of cadences. The first effect of this new departure will be that the melodies are less “ free ” than hitherto, as they must fit the given chords. But after a few attempts things right themselves, and the pupil is delighted at the added feeling of resource.

Duets (piano and voice) should be encouraged. If children invariably sing to their own accompaniments they are apt to get into a groove, whereas communal work has a stimulating effect.

Finally, the child works at purely instrumental extemporisation, which, for the more musical pupils, will lead to the study of composition. As a preparation for this, attention should be drawn to the various shorter forms of musical composition, beginning with the Folk Song, and the Dance Forms, and the pupil should be encouraged to improvise short songs, minuets, gavottes, sarabandes, etc.

We shall now consider in detail a course of instruction in extemporisation, arranging the work in 5 short lessons.

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CHAPTER IV

VOCAL EXTEMPORESING

LESSON 1.

The teacher plays or sings the first half of a 4-bar phrase. The class will then sing it. Individual children complete the phrase in more than one way.

Examples :

Major Keys

1. *Teacher* *Pupil* *Pupil* *Pupil* *Pupil* *Pupil*

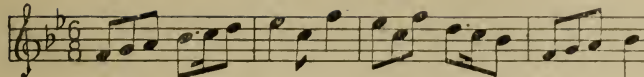

2. *Pupil* *Pupil* *Teacher* *Pupil*

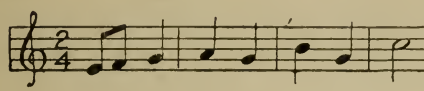
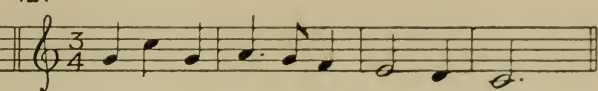
3. *Teacher* *Pupil* 4. *as before*

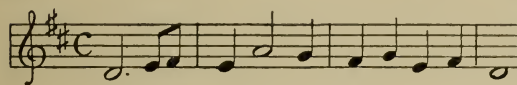
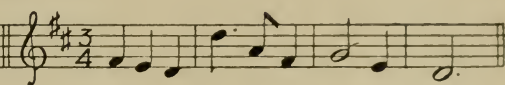
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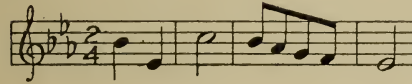
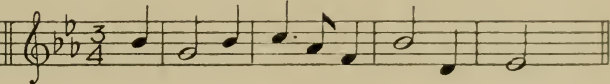
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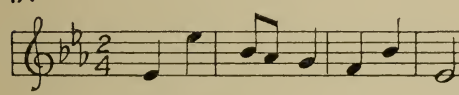
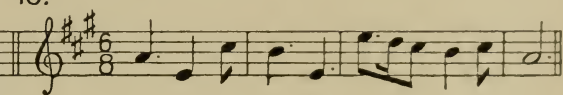
VOCAL EXTEMPORISING

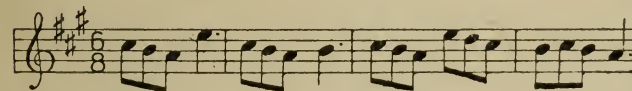
9.  10. 

11.  12. 

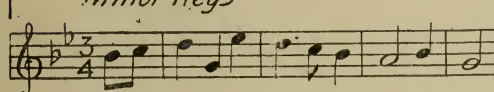
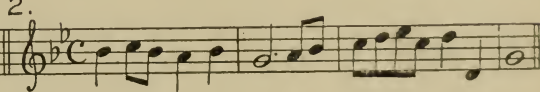
13.  14. 

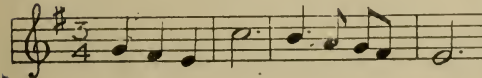
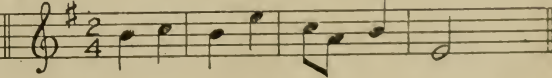
15.  16. 

17.  18. 

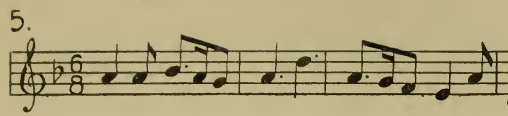
19.  20. 

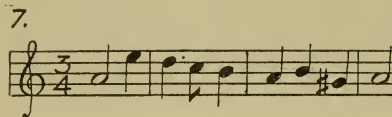
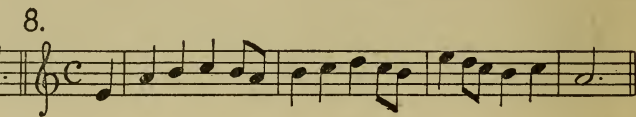
Examples :

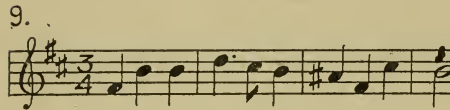
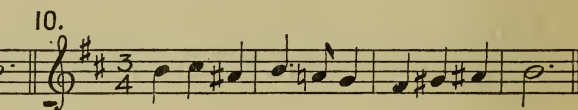
1. *Minor Keys*  2. 

3.  4. 

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5.  6. 

7.  8. 

9.  10. 

It is important to vary the key and time, or monotony will result. Beginners are slow to realise the limitations of *pitch* in vocal melodies, and a valuable lesson is learnt when they find that a tune cannot be sung with equal ease in all keys.

Care should be taken to give plenty of these early exercises and to make the opening phrases as simple as possible. Do not lay down rules as to the final notes of a melody. It is only the inexperienced teacher who states that "the last note of a tune should be the keynote." Without any suggestions the pupils will associate the close of a melody with the Perfect or Plagal cadences.

LESSON 2.

Without the aid of the teacher individual pupils will now give either the first two bars of the 4-bar phrase, or the last two. Suggest that the tune begins on an off-beat sometimes, and that rhythmic patterns shall be introduced to give variety.

LESSON 3.

An 8-bar melody can now be taken, without modulation. The teacher gives the first 4 bars; a pupil completes it.

Attention should be drawn to any points of special interest in the first half of the tune, and care should be taken to make the second half "answer" the first.

VOCAL EXTEMPOREISING

1. *Major Keys* *Teacher* 2.

3. 4.

5. 6.

7. 8.

9. *Minor Keys* 10.

11. 12.

13. 14.

15. 16.

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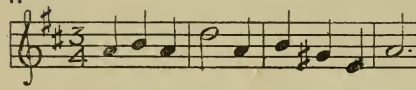
LESSON 4.

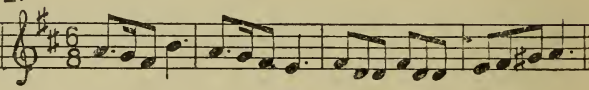
Individual pupils divide the whole 8-bar melody.

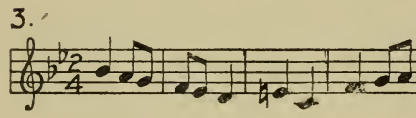
LESSON 5.

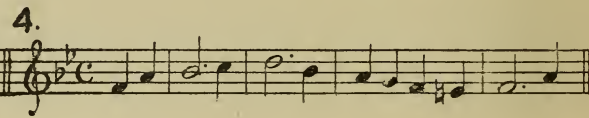
An 8-bar melody is now taken, *with modulation*. The teacher takes the first 4 bars, and ends in the *Dominant* key. The pupils in turn complete the tune. Minor keys as well as major should be chosen.

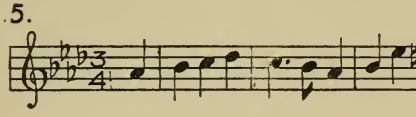
Examples :

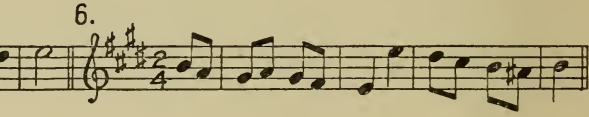
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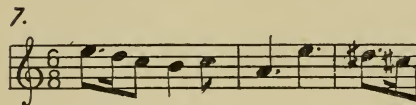
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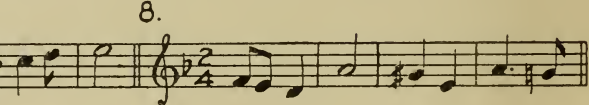
3. 

4. 

5. 

6. 

7. 

8. 

LESSON 6.

Individual pupils divide the whole 8-bar melody.

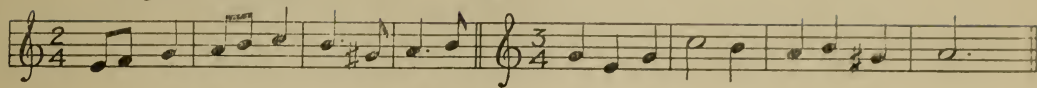
LESSON 7.

Modulations are taken to the *relative major* (minor keys) and *relative minor* (major keys.)

VOCAL EXTEMPORESING

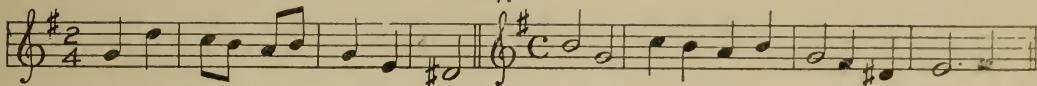
1. *Major to minor*

2.



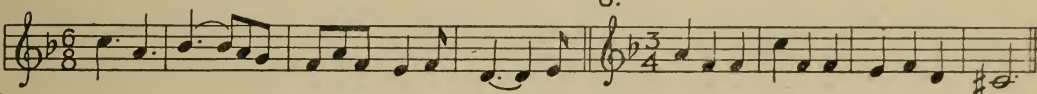
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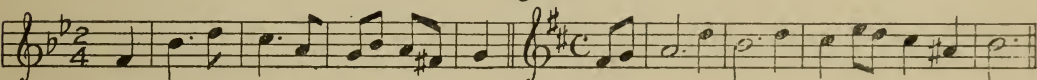
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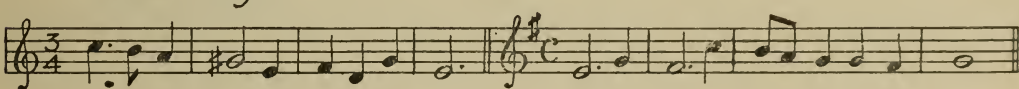
8.



9.

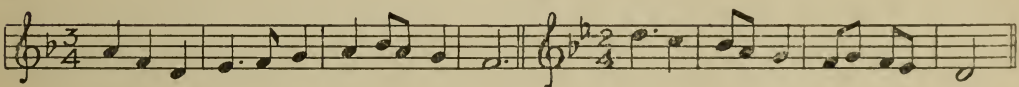
Minor to Major

10.



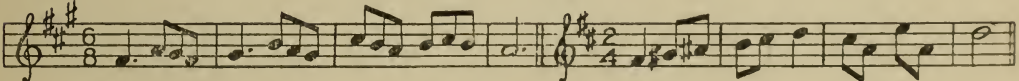
11.

12.



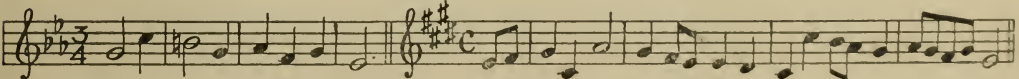
13.

14.



15.

16.



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LESSON 8.

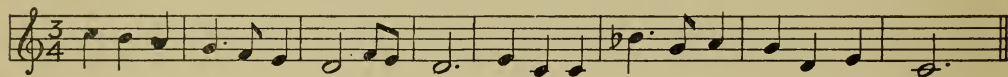
Individual pupils complete the whole melody.

LESSON 9.

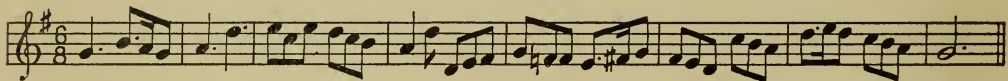
The modulation to the *subdominant* is taken next. This is the most difficult of the simpler modulations, because of the peculiarly strong feeling of the new tonality, which makes the beginner lose his way in getting back to the original key. To reduce the difficulty, it is well to begin by taking the modulation in the *second half* of the tune, when the original tonality has been firmly established. The pupil should improvise the whole 8 bars himself, in the following manner :—

Examples :

1.



2.



LESSON 10.

An important stage has now been reached. The pupil is to be introduced to the *16-bar melody*. From this time the teacher need not begin any more of the tunes, as the pupil is getting more experienced.

A modulation should in every case be introduced at the 8th bar. It is also a good plan to repeat the first 4 bars note for note after the 8th bar. This is an excellent piece of discipline in the early stages of the work. Part of the difficulty of extemporising at an instrument has been overcome if the pupil has formed the habit of memorising short phrases quickly.

It will be found interesting to divide the 16 bars among three pupils, thus :—

A takes the first 4 bars ;

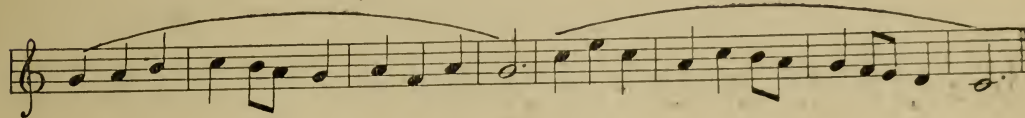
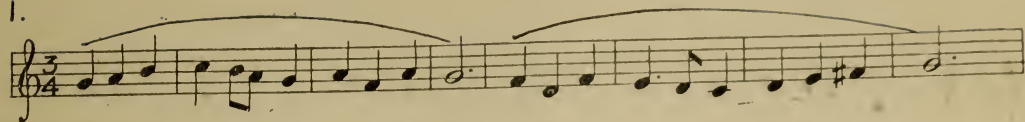
B „ „ second „ , ending in the new key.

A repeats the first „

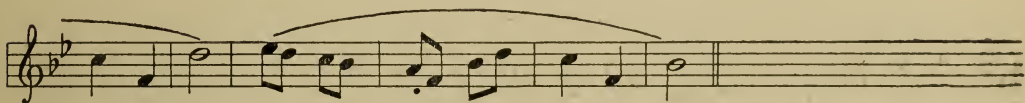
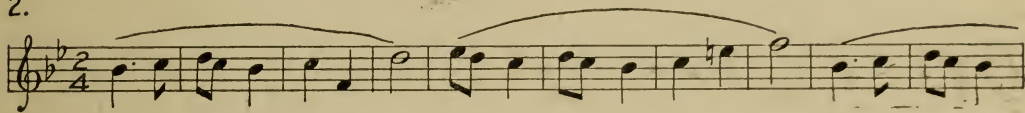
C takes the last „

VOCAL EXTEMPORISING

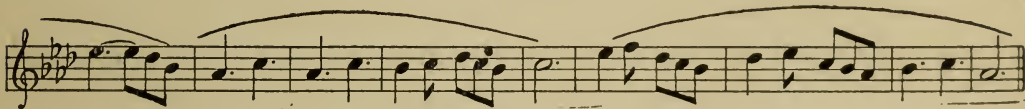
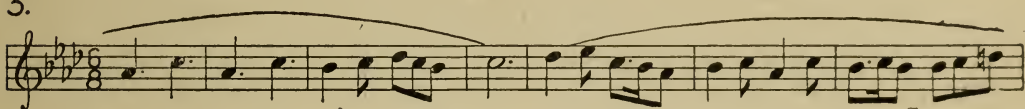
1.



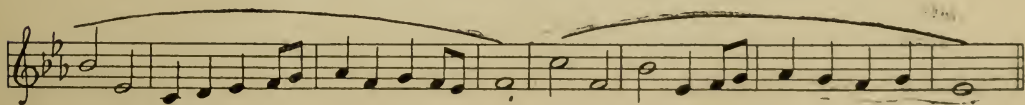
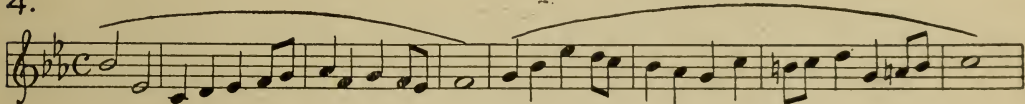
2.



3.



4.



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5.



6.



LESSON 11.

The following, among other variants of the 16-bar melody, may be studied with advantage.

- 1 Bars 9 to 12, inclusive, to consist of the first 4 bars transposed into the new key.
2. Bars 9 to 12, inclusive, to modulate from the new key back to the old key.

Pupils should be encouraged to analyse the melodic structure of traditional songs. For this purpose Boosey's "National Songs" is a storehouse of good material.

CHAPTER V

PIANOFORTE ACCOMPANIMENTS TO VOCAL EXTEMPORISING

LESSON 12.

THE pupil is now ready to learn how to add a simple *accompaniment* to an 8-bar vocal melody.

Previous to this, he has learnt to sing chords in arpeggio, and to write them down from

ACCOMPANIMENTS

dictation. He will now be taught to play the *Perfect Cadence*, in various positions and keys, together with different combinations of the 2 chords involved.

Perfect Cadence

1st Position. 2nd Position. 3rd Position.

By introducing the flattened 3rd of the scale, the cadences are played in the minor key. The unsatisfactory effect of consecutive 5ths and 8ths should be discovered *by experiment*. We do not want to burden the mind of the beginner with "rules" at this stage, but he will be saved much needless worry if he be taught to observe two simple directions :

- (1) To avoid *leaps* between notes in the same parts.
- (2) To aim at *contrary motion* in the extreme parts.

The teacher should now write up on the board a series of chords for the basis of an 8-bar melody, without modulation, using numbers to represent common chords on the different degrees of the scale.

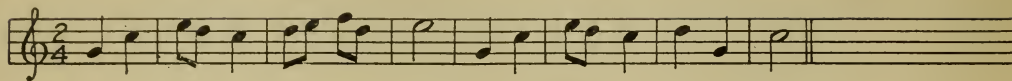
Thus if he write up

I I V I | I I V I

giving one chord to each bar, the child at the piano will play

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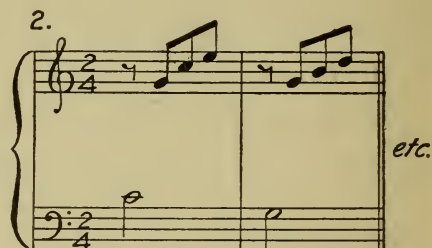
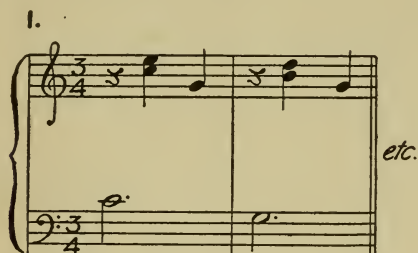
and a companion will sing something of this sort :



Other simple patterns on these chords are

I I I V		I I V I
I V I V		V I V I
I V V I		V I V I
V I V I		I I V I
V V I I		V I V I, etc.

The children will soon learn to invent various types of accompaniment, by means of broken chords, etc., such as



LESSON 13.

The *Plagal Cadence* is now taught, which means that an accompaniment based on 3 chords can be played.

Plagal Cadence
1st Position. 2nd Position. 3rd Position.



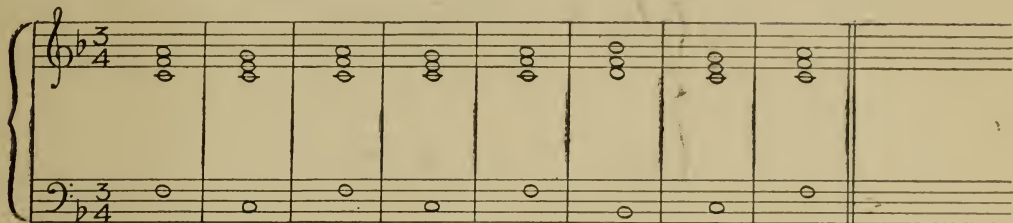
ACCOMPANIMENTS

By the introduction of the flattened 3rd and 6th of the scale, these cadences can be played in the minor keys.

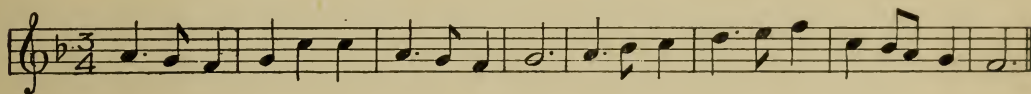
A simple chord pattern is

I V I V | I IV V I

For which the child at the piano can play



And the singer can sing



Other chord patterns are

I I V I		I IV V I
I IV V I		I I V I
I I IV V		I IV V I
IV I IV I		I I V I
IV V I I		IV I V I, etc.

LESSON 14.

The Interrupted and $\frac{65}{43}$ cadences are now taken.

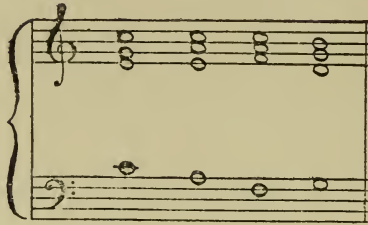
*Interrupted
Cadence*

$\frac{65}{43}$ Cadence

IMPROVISING

As before, these should be taken in all the keys, major and minor.
A useful chord pattern to study at this stage is

I. VI. IV. V. *etc*



8-bar vocal melodies are then extemporised to fit the extended range of chords.

LESSON 15.

Passages showing the use of the *Supertonic* chord come next, such as
i.e.,

I. IV. II. V. I. *etc*



The pupil is now gradually finding it possible to harmonise any simple melody, without modulation.

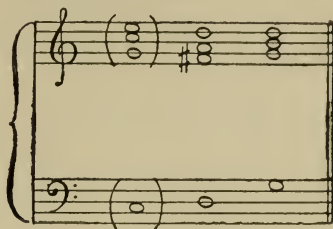
The teacher should remember the importance of associating each chord with a musical *phrase*. In this way he will avoid the mechanical type of work which results from treating each chord as an isolated phenomenon.

ACCOMPANIMENTS

LESSON 16.

Chords necessary for simple *modulations* in an 8-bar melody come next. The pupil should be reminded of the importance of the Perfect Cadence in giving a strong feeling of *tonality*.

*Modulation to the
Dominant Key.*



Melodies can then be sung to fit the following chord patterns:—

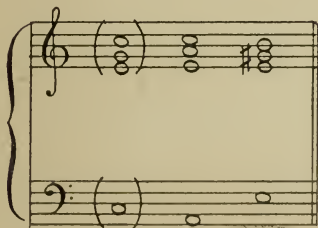
I I 5 1		I IV V I
V I 5 1		V I V I
IV I 5 1		I I V I, etc.

N.B.—Arabic numerals denote chords in the new key.

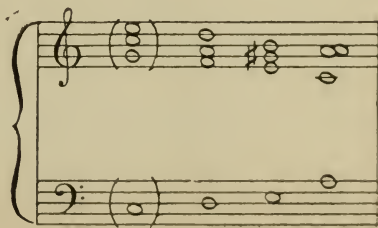
LESSON 17.

The modulation to the *Relative minor* comes next. Two methods may now be taken.

To dom.^t chord



To tonic chord



IMPROVISING

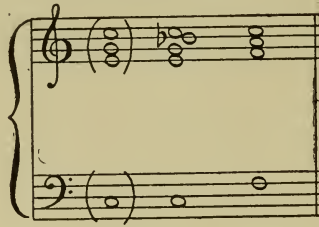
The following chord patterns are simple :—

I	I	1	5		IV	I	V	I
IV	I	1	5		VI	IV	V	I
I	II	5	1		IV	I	V	I

LESSON 18.

Modulation to the *Subdominant* key. As was seen for the vocal work in this connection, it is better to begin by taking the modulation in the second half of the tune.

*Modulation to the
subdominant key.*



Chord patterns can be taken as follows :—

I	I	V	I		5	1	V	I
V	I	V	I		5	1	IV	I
I	IV	V	I		5	1	V	I

LESSON 19.

Modulations from *minor* keys must now be considered. Those to the *dominant* and *subdominant* will present no new difficulty.



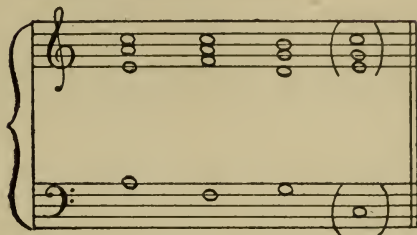
The chord patterns may be taken as in Lessons 16 and 18,

ACCOMPANIMENTS

LESSON 20.

The modulation to the *relative major* needs at least 3 chords.

*Modulation to the
relative major key.*



Chord patterns as follows :—

I	I	4	5		I	IV	V	I
I	VI	5	1		IV	I	IV	I
V	VI	5	1		I	I	V	I

The question may be asked : “ Can a child really find melodies on the spur of the moment to fit all these chords ? ” The answer is, “ Have faith ! ” He finds them very quickly if you do not suggest that it is difficult. Chord patterns appeal to the subconscious ear. Play them over two or three times before asking for volunteers to improvise a vocal melody to them. You will be surprised at the quick response.

LESSONS 21 and 22.

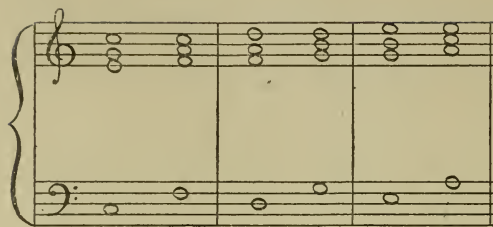
The foregoing work is now applied to 16-bar melodies. The use of *sequences* should be explained at this stage. Patterns of the following kind are useful :—

1.

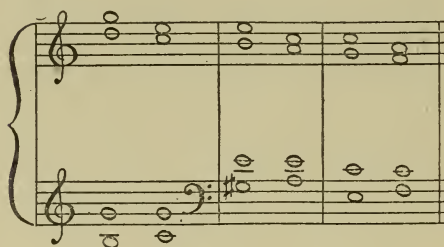


IMPROVISING

2.

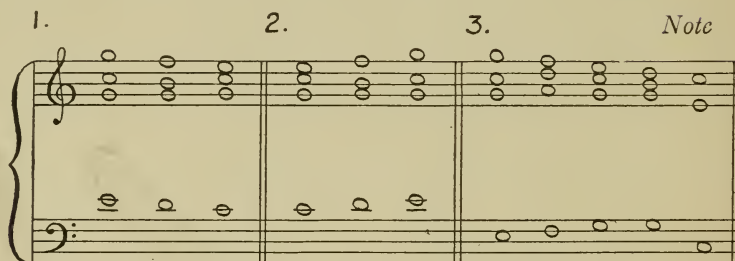


3.



They should be played in all keys.

Do not forget the following simple phrases :—



LESSON 23.

An interesting variation to the work can now be given. Pupils should extemporise vocally two at a time to the accompaniment. They must agree among themselves beforehand as to the order of the parts, but the latter should be allowed to cross freely. Suspensions should be introduced.

ACCOMPANIMENTS

LESSON 24.

One or more parts are added to a fixed *vocal* Canto Fermo. This is much more difficult than the preceding work, as the support of the piano accompaniment is withdrawn.

LESSON 25.

It will now be found useful to make the pupils themselves responsible for the type and structure of their pieces. Let them be as free as possible, and the teacher will himself learn something from his pupils. Youth is adventurous, and although many mistakes will be made, the coming generation has the right to lead the way to new paths and new developments.

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